

Strategies to Advance Your Medical Writing Career, Part I: Working Effectively With Recruiters

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Experienced recruiters can help medical writers advance their careers. Many medical writers, however, do not know how to effectively work with recruiters, and some (eg, freelance medical writers) may not think they need to work with recruiters.

Lindsey Summers, MBA, agreed to share some thoughts with us on why recruiters can be medical writers' assets, how to identify and effectively work with a recruiter whose experience matches your need, and the dos and don'ts of working with a recruiter.

Ms Summers is Director, Pharmaceutical Consulting Division, at Green Key Resources, Denver, Colorado. She is a seasoned third-party recruiter specializing in helping companies hire medical writers and has been providing guidance on career advancement in medical communications to medical writers for more than a decade. She has led workshops on career paths in medical communications and frequently offers advice through LinkedIn and AMWA's Engage Forum.



Journal: *Can recruiters help medical writers advance their careers? If so, how?*

Summers: The answer is yes! For medical writers who are applying for a job, recruiters can provide insights about the company that you are applying to. They may even know the hiring manager, the team, and the culture of the organization. They can also help you prepare for interviews and negotiate a salary.

It is important to remember, however, that all recruiters are not equally experienced. Make sure you vet the recruiter you are working with and make sure the recruiter understands your field and knows what you are looking for in your next opportunity.

Journal: *AMWA members possess different experiences and diverse backgrounds. Who would benefit the most from working with recruiters? Aspiring medical writers who wish to break into the field, medical writers with extensive experience who want to change jobs, or all of them?*

Summers: First, I think it is important for medical writers to understand that there are 2 types of recruiters: corporate recruiters and third-party recruiters. Corporate recruiters work internally at a company either as permanent employees or contractors; they are dedicated to that one company only and are paid a base salary or an hourly rate. Third-party recruiters generally work for agencies and recruit for many companies for permanent jobs, contract jobs, or both; they typically can help only experienced medical writers because they are paid by clients to find what they are looking for in a medical writer.

Third-party recruiters rarely help people who are transitioning from one field to another. Even though we know many people in the industry, a company is not going to pay us to find someone they can easily find on their own. However, if you are willing to take a contract-based project and are available to work onsite, a recruiter may be able to help you find such an opportunity. Contract jobs are often a great way to break into a field. Although you probably need to meet all of an employer's requirements for a permanent job, you may need to meet only 60% of the requirements for a contract job because the company can "try before they buy" with a contract/temporary position.

Journal: *What are your top 3 tips for aspiring medical writers who strive to break into the medical writing field?*

Summers: Great question! Here are my suggestions.

First, know what you want to do and why you want to do it. I cannot tell you the number of people who say “I want to be a medical writer” but haven’t done any research on the types of roles out there when I communicate with them over the phone or through email.

Second, pay attention to details when you apply for a job. Most importantly, make sure your resume is up to par and PLEASE do not just rely on spell checking. This is where true quality control comes in. For example, spell checking will not catch “clinical trail” when it is supposed to be “clinical trial.” In addition, if you are a new medical writer, you most likely will be asked to take a writing test, so make sure you check and double check your product.

Third, let your communication skills shine. Make sure all your communication pieces (emails, letters, etc) with prospective employers, recruiters, hiring managers, and colleagues are top notch. Send a “thank you” note after your interview to show your follow-up and writing skills. After all, you are a writer and you might as well showcase your work!

Journal: *What’s your advice for experienced medical writers who plan to change jobs?*

Summers: My best advice is to engage with people in your network, including past and current coworkers and managers, people you cross-functionally work with, college friends, people you know through professional organizations such as AMWA, and trusted recruiters. Before you hit the “apply” button on a job posting, try to first reach out to those you know who work in the company, or recruiters who work with that company. Often, it is the person who is known to the team who gets the position.

Journal: *Recruiters can be valuable to those who seek a full-time job, but can they help freelance medical writers grow their business? If so, how?*

Summers: Yes, we can. There are recruiters of all types. Some work on permanent jobs, some fill contract positions, and some work with freelance medical writers who have their own businesses such as LLCs and S Corps. Over the years, I have placed many freelance writers in part-time roles and connected them with companies that they otherwise would not have found. It is extremely important, however, to keep a recruiter as your point of contact once he or she has already made the connection for you. It is not ethical to go around the

recruiter and reach out directly to the hiring manager or the human resources department during the hiring process, and companies frown upon this type of practice.

Journal: *Like medical writers, recruiters have different levels of experience and different working styles. What’s your advice for medical writers on choosing recruiters?*

Summers: Make sure you get to know your recruiters. Ask them in what areas they specialize and with which companies they work. Interview them like you would interview a company with which you are considering working—but expect questions back in return. For example, I would not be your best choice if you are looking for a medical education-related job because I do not work in that area. However, I would be a great option if you are looking for a job in regulatory writing because that is where 85% of my medical writing recruiting experience lies. Most recruiters will be very honest and upfront about what they can and cannot help with.

Journal: *Medical writers sometimes receive phone calls or email inquiries from different recruiters about the same position. Does it matter for the medical writer regarding which recruiter to choose?*

Summers: It depends on the type of position and the company. Some companies work with 50+ recruiting firms for Vendor Management System jobs, for which we must help qualified applicants submit their applications as soon as possible. In any case, you want to make sure that the recruiter you work with knows how to highlight your experience so you can stand out among other applicants. Some companies may work with only 3 to 5 recruiting firms on a position. In many cases, the recruiters are peers and they are all good at what they do. Again, vet your recruiters, but also expect to get vetted yourself.

Journal: *What is your advice for freelance medical writers who wish to get a full-time job? Do they have to start from the very beginning (eg, get an entry-level job first)?*

Summers: No, if you are an experienced freelance medical writer, you do not have to start with an entry-level job. You should utilize your network and see if any of your current or former clients would be interested in hiring you as a full-time employee. If you have already demonstrated your skills to a company or to someone on their team, getting hired by the company will be the path of least resistance. And this is how most jobs are obtained. Another good way to get hired is contracting at a company as a W2-based, temporary employee first. This arrangement gives the company an opportunity to

get comfortable with you before converting your temporary position into a permanent job.

For companies that consider hiring freelancers as full-time employees, the biggest concern is the freelance's willingness to stay with one client on one project and not expect a wide range of opportunities. For freelance medical writers who are considering full-time positions, try to think of freelancing as going wide and working as a full-time employee at a company as going deep.

Journal: *What can medical writers expect from recruiters with whom they work? Is it reasonable for a medical writer to ask for feedback even if he or she doesn't get an offer?*

Summers: It depends. All recruiters are not the same. Again, evaluate the recruiters you work with first. Can you ask for feedback? Sure, you can. However, third-party recruiters may not always receive feedback from the companies they work with, and internal corporate recruiters may not feel comfortable sharing. Providing feedback can be a slippery slope. Many people want feedback, but once you share feedback with them, they get defensive and argumentative, and it does not always end well. I have shared feedback with applicants in the past and regretted it because the candidates went directly to the top management at the company afterward and argued their points. For this reason, many recruiters choose not to share feedback even if they have it.

Journal: *What are the dos and don'ts when working with a recruiter?*

Summers: Here are some dos and don'ts:

Do:

- Be collaborative
- Be honest
- Follow up

Don't:

- Be pushy
- Go around your recruiter
- Be difficult to work with
- Disappear at the interview or job-offer stage

Journal: *Should a medical writer engage a recruiter only when looking for a job? Or should a medical writer maintain a professional relationship with a recruiter all the time?*

Summers: This is what networking is all about. You always want to be ready for what is next, so try to maintain a professional relationship with not only a few good recruiters but also

current and past colleagues, people you know through professional organizations, alumni at your college, and so forth. In addition, be open to helping others. It is karma. To get, you must give. You do not want to ask for something when you need it. If you must, put it on your calendar to remind yourself to be active. For example, comment on or "like" a LinkedIn post once a day, participate in discussions on the AMWA Engage Forum once a week, send a note to a prior colleague once a month. Be consistent and follow the ABCs: Always... Be... Connecting.

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